



mindfulness

MAKING
CARING
COMMON
PROJECT



GRADES K-12	IMPLEMENTED BY Teachers, School Adults	TIME & RESOURCE INTENSITY low → high
CAPACITIES PROMOTED Emotion regulation; Attention control; Classroom management; Stress reduction		

Overview

A growing body of research supports the potential benefits of mindfulness, including stress reduction, emotion regulation, better relationship satisfaction, and improved memory and attention^{1,2}. Applications of mindfulness, the practice of focusing our attention in a particular way, can be relatively easy to implement and are not time intensive. Given the benefits and feasibility, mindfulness has become increasingly popular across a variety of fields, including medicine, psychology, business, and more recently, in education.

Evaluations of school-based mindfulness practices have shown positive findings, including increased attention, self-control, class participation, and respect for others³. Mindfulness practices can also serve as a powerful classroom management tools, reducing stress for teachers and students⁴. Many mindfulness activities can be easily interwoven into routine classroom activities and lessons. They can also be extremely useful during transitions, for example, settling down after beginning a new class. Given the potential benefits and the ease of implementing mindfulness practices, these strategies are well-suited for schools.

While there are many methods of practicing mindfulness, we have provided the following short practices to serve as an introduction. We have also included a list of resources where you may find additional information about mindfulness as well as other mindfulness exercises.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness is one type of contemplative, reflective practice. Mindfulness is generally defined as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally⁵. Mindfulness can occur anywhere and at any time. It may involve breathing, noticing, reflecting, and/or pausing before speaking or acting.

1 Chiesa, A., Raffaella, C., & Alessandro, S. (2011). Does mindfulness training improve cognitive abilities? A systematic review of neuropsychological findings. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 31(3), 449-464. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21183265>

2 Davis, D.M. & Hayes, J.A. (2011). What are the benefits of mindfulness? A practice review of psychotherapy-related research. *Psychotherapy*, 48(2), 198-208. <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/pst-48-2-198.pdf>

3 Black, D. S. & Fernando, R. (2013). Mindfulness training and classroom behavior among lower-income and ethnic minority elementary school children. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. Published online in advance of print.

4 Wisner, B. L. (2013). An exploratory study of mindfulness meditation for alternative school students: Perceived benefits for improving school climate and student functioning. *Mindfulness*, 5(6):626-638. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs12671-013-0215-9>

5 Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. Hyperion.

Mindfulness Practice

The following mindfulness exercises can be integrated into the school day at any time, but may be particularly useful during transitions. The benefits of mindfulness are also maximized by consistent practice. It's important that you find a time each day to practice mindfulness with students (e.g. beginning of the day, after lunch). If every day is not possible, set aside at least 2-3 times each week to practice mindfulness.

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

1. Before getting started with your first mindfulness practice, let students know that they are going to be trying something new. Let them know that you will try it too. Explain why it is important. Talk about the benefits of mindfulness, such as stress reduction, better memory, attention control, etc.
2. Briefly explain mindfulness and what they should expect. Here are a few tips and prompts for explaining mindfulness:
 - “Sometimes we all feel like we have a hard time focusing or paying attention. Our days are busy and there is a lot going on. Mindfulness can help to take a few minutes to pause and let our minds and bodies relax and refocus.”
 - “We are going to practice mindfulness—paying attention to our thoughts, feelings, sensations, and the things happening in our environment right now.”
 - Explain how they will practice mindfulness (i.e. when, where, how).
 - When practicing mindfulness, we will sit in our chairs in a relaxed, comfortable position. Sometimes, we can close our eyes if it is comfortable.” Let students know that closing eyes is optional and if, at any time, a student feels uncomfortable, he/she can choose not to participate, but should be respectful to the others who are participating. You might say, “If this feels uncomfortable, it’s okay to simply sit quietly; I just ask that you are respectful to your classmates who are benefitting from the practice, and don’t distract them.”
 - “Mindfulness is a quiet activity that we will practice at our desks after lunch.”
3. The following exercises include instructions and prompts as well as time recommendations. Whenever possible, participate in the mindfulness exercise with students. Keep in mind that mindfulness may not be for everyone and in some cases may be triggering or cause heightened anxiety. Let students know that if, at any time, they do not feel comfortable, they do not have to participate and should let you know.

CONSIDER THIS

Using visuals may be helpful in explaining mindfulness and the benefits of regular practice. Consider using one of the following infographics with your students: [The Mighty Powers of Meditation](#) or [Your Body on Meditation](#).

CONSIDER THIS

Keep parents informed about mindfulness. Parent communication (including emails, newsletters, or workshops) can share information about what mindfulness is, how the school practices mindfulness, and ideas for home practice. Parent education evenings can continue these conversations and engage parents further.

4. Follow-up Reflection (optional): see below for reflection questions and accompanying instructions.

MINDFULNESS EXERCISES

Mindful Breathing

1. Ask students to sit upright, comfortably on the floor or at their desks, with their hands resting on their knees and their eyes closed or looking down at their hands.
2. Ask students to pay all of their attention to their breath, wherever they feel it the most (throat, stomach, etc.). Let them know that if their attention wanders, they should gently and patiently try to return it to their breath. Helpful prompts to give students:
 - “See if you can notice the breath is cooler on the inhale and warmer on the exhale.”
 - “Think about breathing into a paper bag and imagine it filling up with air.”
 - “Focus on your stomach going in and out.”
3. After 1-2 minutes, gently ask students to bring their awareness back to the sounds around them, and eventually ask them to open their eyes when they are ready. Remember to assure students not to be discouraged (particularly in the early stages of practice) if their mind wandered. Mindfulness takes practice and they will get better as they continue. Helpful prompt to give students:
 - “Take the next 30 seconds to look around or stretch, before we move on to the rest the school day.”
4. Give students a moment to return to their desk, next activity, etc.

Count to Five

1. Ask students to sit upright, comfortably on the floor or at their desks, with their hands resting on their knees and their eyes closed or looking down at their hands.
2. Ask students to relax their bodies and their breath. Have them silently count to five in their head (1,2,3,4,5), and then count backward from 5 (5,4,3,2,1). (Note: it may be helpful to lead the count for the first 30 seconds and then trail off.) For the next two minutes, simply count to five forwards and backwards. Remind students that when they notice their minds wander, which is completely natural, to gently bring their attention back and start again.
3. After 1-2 minutes, gently ask students to bring their awareness back to the sounds around them, and eventually ask them to open their eyes when they are ready. Remember to assure students not to be discouraged (particularly in the early stages of practice) if their mind wandered. Mindfulness takes practice and they will get better as they continue. Helpful prompt to give students:
 - “Take the next 30 seconds to look around or stretch, before we move on to the rest of the school day.”
4. Give students a moment to return to their desk, next activity, etc.

Mindful Observation

1. Ask students to sit upright, comfortably at their desks.
2. Pass out an object. It could be anything: paper clips, the cover of a book, a rock, an unsharpened pencil, etc. Make sure each student has one object before moving on.
3. Instruct students that once time starts (ring a bell to start time if you have one), they will observe the object—noticing how it looks, feels, and smells, while remaining nonjudgmental. Just noticing, observing, describing, without judging. Helpful prompts to give students:
 - “Observe your object, noticing it, describing it, nonjudgmentally.”
 - “Notice what it feels like, is it smooth? Rough? Soft?”
 - “Notice how it smells.”
 - “Notice how it looks, is it sharp, is it round.”
4. After 2-3 minutes, gently ask students to bring their awareness back to the room and their surroundings.
5. Ask students to share their observations about their objects. Remind them to stick to observations, describing what they noticed nonjudgmentally. One of the key components of mindfulness is to just notice, without judgment.
6. After several students have had the opportunity to share, wrap up the activity and collect the objects. Give students a moment to move on to the next class activity.

Reflection Questions (optional)

These questions can be used to debrief after a mindfulness activity. Have students answer one or all of these questions as a journal exercise, in pairs, or have a group discussion.

1. Was this exercise hard or easy? Why?
2. Did you notice your mind wandering during the exercise? What strategies did you use to bring yourself back to the present or to the task at hand?
3. Do you notice any progress in your mindfulness practice? Has it gotten easier or harder? Do you notice any benefits? Has the experience changed in any way?
4. How might mindfulness practice—noticing your emotions, thoughts, and environment around you—lead to a more caring classroom?
5. Do you think you could use a mindfulness exercise outside of the classroom? In what situation might it be helpful?

Resources

Teaching Mindfulness to Kids

- **Greater Happiness in 5 Minutes a Day:** a brief guide to using the practice of loving-kindness meditation with children
- **Tips for Teaching Mindfulness to Kids:** tips and instruction for using mindfulness with children

- **Eight Ways to Teach Mindfulness to Kids:** tips and exercise ideas
- **The MindUP Curriculum by the Hawn Foundation:** lessons and strategies for helping students focus attention, improve self-regulation, build resilience, and develop a positive mind-set

Mindfulness Exercises

- **Mindfulness by Design:** guided meditations and resources for teens, teachers, and families.
- **Applying Mindfulness to Mundane Classroom Tasks:** mindfulness activity example and one educator's positive experience using mindfulness in the classroom
- **Outdoor Mindfulness Exercises for Earth Day**
- **Mind in a Jar - Planting Seeds:** Short video, mindfulness activity

Mindfulness for Teachers

- **Just Breathe: When Teachers Practice Mindfulness:** introduction to mindfulness for teachers and Q&A with the author of *Teach, Breathe, Learn: Mindfulness In and Out of the Classroom*
- **The Oasis Within: Mindfulness Practice for Teachers:** introduction to mindfulness for teachers and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, includes practice exercises

Research

- **How Meditation Can Reshape Our Brains:** Sara Lazar
- **Frontiers in Psychology: Mindfulness-based interventions in schools—a systematic review and meta-analysis**

For questions or comments, please contact us at mcc@gse.harvard.edu

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